Sashimi

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Sashimi

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Summary

Hannibal spots the merman in the back corner of the shop, languishing in an undersized galvanized steel tank.

Notes

The fic below is inspired by this fantastically haunting painting made by FlyingRotten.

Chapter 1

Hannibal spots the merman in the back corner of the shop, languishing in an undersized galvanized steel tank.

He tilts his head curiously when the creature meets his eyes, and then Hannibal strides towards it, passing pens and cages containing smaller wonders as he does so. Insectile fairies buzz with fury from behind the glass of their tanks as he goes by, and in their wire enclosure a small herd of jackalopes raise their twitchy noises upward to scent him suspiciously. Hannibal's hand falls casually on the forehead of a unicorn foal as it stretches out its neck as far as its pen will allow to nuzzle him, and he feels the stub of its budding horn, but he does not stop to tarry with the animal.

Insofar as the other beasts and creatures in the shop are unhappy, they have come to feel that way because they are wild things which are accustomed to avoiding humans, or because their enclosures are too small or otherwise inadequate, or because the smell of the blood of their peers, which hangs heavy in the air, incites a certain degree of instinctual anxiety.

The merman, though… he knows exactly why he is here, and he understands what is to become of him, and the helpless terror of that knowledge has dilated his pupils to pinpricks, the black depths of which seem infinite. Crouching down to the merman's level, Hannibal swims in the depths of that wretched, agonized dread, inhaling the scent of his fear from among the mystical zoo smell of the basement-level exotic meats shop, and finds something else lurking beneath it all.

The tank that they have the merman in is far too small, and his tail flops over the edge in a way that strikes Hannibal as being acutely uncomfortable. His scales are an iridescent array of blues and greens, but where they have been left out of the water they are dry and flaking and dull. He clutches a wet old blanket over his shoulders as though it might offer him some sort of protection, and his knuckles are white from how tightly he grips the tattered cloth. The heavy metal collar around his neck is sealed with a padlock, and the short chain that extends from it is bolted to a fixture on the wall. Dark ringlets of damp hair frame a face that is strikingly beautiful.

The man behind the counter mistakes Hannibal's interest in the creature as pity, and has a chuckle at Hannibal's expense. "He might look harmless, buddy, but that one's a man-eater," the butcher warns.

"Siren," Hannibal says, without looking away from the creature. The merman has not broken eye contact with him since Hannibal first looked his way, but his terror has only grown from what he sees in his eyes. He trembles.

"That's right," the butcher says. Hannibal can hear the man going through the motions of wrapping his order in butcher's paper. "Unusual to find one of those - so much rarer to take one alive."

“Why doesn’t he sing now?” Hannibal asks. He has, of course, worked that out for himself, but he often finds it beneficial to feign a certain degree of naivety in such matters.

“Its tongue’s been taken out.”

“Ah,” Hannibal says, and then pauses speculatively. “Is it available?”

“Already sold.”

“A pity,” Hannibal says, with real disappointment. He straightens to his full height, but does not look away from the merman. “I’d like to make an alteration to my order, if you please. I think I’ll serve sashimi tonight instead.”

The siren swallows painfully and turns his eyes away from Hannibal. The shaking has become considerably more severe.

There follows a brief negotiation on the question of the price, per ounce, for a high quality cut taken from the tail. “Four pounds, then,” Hannibal says, settling on a price that might have bankrupted a man of lesser means. “I would like to watch you harvest the meat.”

This is not, Hannibal knows from experience, an unusual request; given the expense of the items offered at this particular specialty shop, patrons often demand that their purchases be slaughtered and butchered in front of them, to guarantee that meat is fresh and has not been replaced by a cheaper substitution.

The man has hair the color of spoiled cream, and now he brushes it out of his eyes with the back of a heavily muscled forearm. “It’s always the big spenders who are so worried about being cheated,” he gripes, but good naturedly, and takes the heavy club down from its hook on the wall.

Hannibal blinks at that. “You haven’t a bolt gun?”

The man smiles down at Hannibal from a considerably greater height. “More of a show this way.”

“Inhumane.”

Hannibal says the single word flatly, with no inflection.

The butcher sizes Hannibal up, then visibly decides that it is safe to dismiss him. “I can find another buyer,” he tells Hannibal, all good humor gone now. “No problem.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Hannibal says graciously, and steps to the side as the butcher strides past him.

In a way, Hannibal thinks that the merman’s fear is less now that he can see that the matter is nearing its end. He is staring at Hannibal again now, almost as though he considers the butcher to be beneath his notice, and the lines of his face are hard with bitter resignation.

Hannibal has seen a similar reaction to imminent death on the faces of a few of the people he has killed, but only very rarely. Only among the extremely brave. He smiles at the siren to show how pleased he is with him, and sees something - hope? - flickering in the creature's eyes.

When the butcher raises his club, Hannibal steps up behind him and drawing the folding knife from his pocket opens it in one smooth gesture and runs the blade across his throat.

Before the man can fall, Hannibal catches him by the back of his shirt to keep him on his feet; there's some fight in the man still, and Hannibal does not wish for him to attract the attention of the security guards that are watching the door upstairs by thrashing around or knocking things over. He holds on despite the butcher's desperate efforts to shake him off, and when he abandons his attempts to knock Hannibal away with his fist and instead presses the open palm of his hand against his bleeding neck to try to stem the flow, Hannibal catches his wrist and wretches it away from the gash, pinning it behind his back instead.

When the blood begins to shower down over him, the siren opens his mouth in the purest joy that Hannibal has ever had the pleasure to witness, as though he is welcoming the coming of rain after a nearly deadly drought, and Hannibal sees that the inside of his mouth is lined with row after row of needle-sharp teeth.

The butcher is nearly still now. Hannibal lets him slide to the floor, then bends to retrieve his knife from where he dropped it. He is not quite dead when Hannibal crouches over him and cuts out his tongue.

Hannibal flicks blood from his fingertips and then carries the tongue to the counter to make a parcel. "We'll eat this together," he tells the siren, and for a long moment the creature simply blinks at him, dumbfounded, but then he nods his assent.

Placing the brown paper-wrapped package in his jacket pocket, Hannibal finds the key ring hanging from a peg behind the counter.

When he unlocks the collar from around the siren's neck, he grabs Hannibal's wrist in his own hands and clings, his eyes a colorful riot of emotion - relief and gratitude and vicious satisfaction at the death of the butcher - but he is evaluating Hannibal too, making a decision about whether or not to trust him, and Hannibal suspects that if those teeth close over his hand they will shred it beyond all repair in the blink of an eye.

But when the merman brings Hannibal's hand to his lips it is to rain kisses onto it, and Hannibal is curious about what it will feel like to kiss him on the mouth, with all those teeth but only the stub of his ruined tongue; that he will learn the answer to this question already feels inevitable.

Still holding onto Hannibal's wrist, the siren lifts Hannibal's hand and rest it on the crown of his head, in among the tangle of damp curls. Following the bidding of some impulse he hardly understands, Hannibal bows his own head and allows the merman to bury his fingers in his hair.

I'm under his sway, Hannibal thinks. *He didn't need to sing to capture me.* The idea does not trouble him. He is sure that he can break free, should he wish to do so.

After a little while, Hannibal straightens and backs away. The siren's eyes fall on the butcher, staring at the body with naked longing.

Hunger knows hunger, and Hannibal drags the body closer to the tank before telling him, "Just don't ruin your appetite.

"I'll be back in just a few minutes," he adds, and heads upstairs to deal with the guards.

Hannibal is not sure, exactly, how he is going to get the siren out of the basement and safely back to his own home without attracting undue attention, and he has even less of an idea about what to do with him when they get there, though he is beginning to consider the possibility of setting up an above ground pool in the basement as a short-term solution, but as he listens to the siren tear into the dead butcher, Hannibal is confident that the future will see to itself.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Ooops it's chapter fic now. <333

The siren allows the man to lift him into his arms and carry him into his home and up the stairs.

Big patches of his scales are already cracked and raw, and hurts to be touched in the way that the man is touching him, though he sloshed water over his hands and arms before he picked the siren up, but there are things about the experience that he enjoys.

He likes being touched, even in the places where that touching provokes a sharp ache, and he likes the feel of strong arms curled around his body, and best of all he likes the implicit trust that the man seems to show in carrying him like this, with his mouth so close to the underside of the man's throat.

The siren has never been inside a human's home before, though he has in the past explored sunken ships, and most of what he knows about the rooms that they pass through and the objects found within them is drawn from inference. He knows, for example, what the bed is for, and when they go past it and into the bathroom it seems obvious at glance that the Jacuzzi tub is meant to be filled with water, though it is empty when the man lowers him into it.

Propping himself up on his elbows to look up at the man, the siren flicks the tip of his tail and pouts angrily, doing his best to induce him to correct this situation.

The man stoops and turns two knobs at the front of the tub, and water comes roaring out through a fixture. "You can control the temperature yourself here," the man explains, and lifts the siren's hand to bring it under the flow as he demonstrates how one of the knobs makes the water colder while the second makes it hotter. It's freshwater, deeply uncomfortable against his scales and almost entirely lacking in scent - water devoid of life - but it's better than nothing and a sincere improvement over his more recent accommodations, and he makes the water as warm as a tide pool heated by the midday sun and ducks his head under the flow.

He can feel the man's eyes on him, and knows that he is beautiful to him, so the siren primps and poses for him, using both hands to push the hair out of his eyes, the water slicking it back, and then turns languidly onto his back so he can smile up at the man with a coy little smile.

The man is good at hiding his distraction. "I've some natural sea salt in the kitchen," he says. "A moment."

While the man is gone, the siren looks around the room. The space is full of orate objects, more elaborate beauty than he has ever seen enclosed in such a small space, and the siren drinks it all in with covetous eyes, wanting to touch and hold and possess everything.

The salt the man gives him, when he returns, is as dead as the water, but the siren takes it grateful and upends the container over the water. The man stops him before much of the salt can spill into the water, lifting the container from his hands with graceful speed.

“Mix it in slowly,” he says. “Let it dilute and defuse until you’ve had some time to gauge your comfort level. If the salinity is too high it may burn you.”

He does what the man tells him, sloshing the water around with his arms to spread the salt. The tub is almost full now, just deep enough for him to submerge himself. He can swim an extremely tight loop in the space, and he does that now, rolling in the shallow water, feeling almost free in his body for the first time in more days than he can count.

It pleases the man, seeing him happy, and that pleasure is contagious. “An improvement, isn’t it? Not ideal, but I’ll put together better accommodations as soon as possible.”

The siren breaches from the water and wraps his arms around the back of the man’s neck, pulling him down to his own level. He presses their foreheads together and holds the man there, skin on skin, at his mercy.

When the siren moves to kiss him the man tries to draw back - suspicious or fearful or just shy, the siren isn’t sure, and though he does not doubt that he could compel the man to accept his kiss gladly, the idea of forcing him to do so is oddly disquieting.

When he lets the man go, he takes a few quick steps backwards, putting space between himself and the siren, but regains his poise quickly.

“You understand English?” the man asks, a little stiffly, and the siren nods in affirmation, though that’s not exactly correct.

I understand desire, he would say, if he could speak. You could speak any of a thousand human tongues or none at all, and I would understand *to be understood* is your greatest desire.

He understands, perfectly well, how dangerous some of the things the man desires are; the idea of eating him was not entirely a ploy to distract the butcher, and the man has not entirely abandoned the idea.

Nonetheless, the siren feels safer than he has in a long while.

“Have you a name?” the man asks. “Mine is Hannibal.”

The siren smiles sadly and shrugs; he does, of course, but he’s lost the ability to speak it, and doubts that it would have ever fit inside a human mouth even if he could.

“Would you object to being called Will?”

The siren hears the sounds that make up the word, but it is the emotional associations that come with the word that matter the most to him. *Force of will,* floats closely to the top of Hannibal's consciousness, his slight unease at not knowing how much of the events that brought the two of them here were directed by the siren, as well as how much control he may come to exercise over Hannibal.

Willful, beneath that. Stubborn and brave, and unlikely to be easily bent to Hannibal's own will, though the prospect of trying to make him pleases Hannibal to some degree.

Closer to his secret heart, the desires that Hannibal hides even from himself, a question: *Willing?* Willing to see him, to know him and accept him as he is?

Will, the siren mouths silently, the stump of his stolen tongue aching at the movement, and when he makes his face soft with pleasure and his smile broad he sees the expression mirrored back at him on Hannibal's face.

Chapter 3

The siren eats from Hannibal's hand.

He leans over the edge of the bathtub to take each small bite of the tongue *tartare* from Hannibal's fingers carefully, eyes squeezing shut with bliss. The rows of needle-fine teeth nip at his skin occasionally, but never hard enough to draw blood.

The taste of the minced raw meat, spiced with capers and cherry peppers, makes his tailfin wiggle with eager delight. Hannibal is glad for that; he hadn't been sure to what extent the amputation of his tongue had robbed Will of the ability to take pleasure in the taste of food. Humans have taste buds on the soft palate, upper esophagus, the sides of the cheeks, and the epiglottis, though they are most heavily concentrated on the tongue, but in many ways siren anatomy does not correspond with that of humans.

Hannibal wonders if the ache in of the still raw stump where his tongue had been adds any relish to the meal.

He has already canceled the dinner party he'd planned for the following evening, weeks of planning brushed aside with a few perfunctorily apologetic group emails to his guest list and the caterers. Hannibal is not yet aware of the extent to which he will find himself willing, for the sake of the siren, to give up things which previously had been of great importance to himself.

Will reaches a hand from the bath, flicking droplets of water from his fingers, and pinches a morsel of *tartare* between his thumb and forefinger.

He offers it to Hannibal lifting his fingers toward Hannibal's lips unflinchingly, and studying every line of his face with those intense, colorful eyes. The depths in those eyes are the likes of which Hannibal can barely imagine, every nuance of emotion so raw and immediate and uncompromised.

Hannibal could drown in it all, happily.

He parts his lips, eagerly, and allows Will to place the *tartare* onto his waiting tongue. His tongue moves, pushing the raw meat toward the back of his throat, then it comes forward again, pressing itself against the bottom of Will's fingertip, tasting the way that the ocean is still ingrained in his skin. Will watches him, undisturbed, with knowing, sultry eyes.

After a few moments, Will draws his hand away.

Will waits, expectantly, to be given more, and when Hannibal obliges him, the siren sucks the meat from his fingers and then catches Hannibal's hand by the wrist. He manipulates it, turning Hannibal's hand over in his own, extending the thumb.

He runs his own fingertip over the pad of Hannibal's thumb, as though reading something in the ridges and whorls of his fingerprint, and then he brings it to his mouth.

The prick of a single one of the siren's many teeth sinking into his skin provokes a bright spark of pain that Hannibal feels in his heart. They both watch the bead of blood form on the pad of his thumb, the red gleaming in the uncompromising light of the bathroom fixtures.

The siren closes his mouth around Hannibal's thumb and, eyes tilted upwards to watch him, sucks.

It excites Hannibal. He works, consciously, to control his breathing.

He knows, of course, that manipulating the sexual desires of human beings is an integral part of how sirens hunt and kill, that this may well be a dangerous game, but it does not worry him overly much.

Hannibal feels the scrap of teeth against his skin when he draws his thumb from the siren's mouth, but Will doesn't bite. The pinprick on Hannibal's thumb paints a smear of red on his lower lip, the blood trickling down his chin, and he leans over the edge of the bath to kiss Will, tasting the taste of his own blood when their mouths meet.

There's a great deal of work that needs to be done, in order to provide Will with better accommodations, and Hannibal throws himself into the project. He has always been an efficient worker, and by evening he has purchased the largest above ground pool available on such short notice, cleared the necessary space in the basement to set it up, and has begun the preliminary steps toward assembling it. He has ordered the necessary supplies to salinate roughly 15,000 gallons of water.

It has been some years since Hannibal had cause to keep someone in the basement long term, but he still has a sunlamp, which he has taken it out of storage. The lamp will defend against depression while also ensure that Will receives enough of the high-intensity ultraviolet-B light his body needs to produce vitamin D.

Hannibal turns further plans over in his head as he makes dinner. A custom-made tank, much larger than the pool, with transparent Plexiglas sides so he may watch Will moving around under the water. A set-up comparable to a professional aquarium, the tank stocked with water plants and live coral and a selection of interesting or beautiful fish. A platform covered in sand, on which Will might lay under the lamps to bask, or on which Hannibal might sit and pass the time with him, his feet in the water.

When he presents Will with the *sashimi* he's made for dinner, the meat's province - bluefin tuna - considerably less exotic than what Hannibal had considered barely twelve hours previously, the siren does not reject the meal, but neither does he respond with the same gusto with which he met the tongue *tartare.* From this, Hannibal gathers that while the siren can eat fish, it is far from his first choice.

Hannibal's disappointment in the siren's disappointment with the meal stings more than he might have expected. He finds himself thinking wistfully back to the butcher, of which Will with his starvation-shrunk stomach could eat only a little, and wishing that he'd taken more from him than simply the tongue.

“Tomorrow,” he tells Will, “I’ll get you something more suitable to your tastes.”

Chapter 4

Naked beneath the sheets in his darken bedroom, Hannibal cycles through his memories of the preceding day as he touches himself.

He has seen photographs of necropsied sirens, and understands that they are fundamentally sexually incompatible with humans - or that least, in regards to sex in traditional penetrative or penetrated sense. As human as Will might seem, his reproductive system is entirely piscine in nature.

It matters hardly at all. Hannibal has no doubt that there are any number of things that they can do for each other, given a little thought and creativity.

Despite what his hand is doing now, Hannibal's thoughts are not overtly sexual. He is thinking, rather, of intimacy. He is thinking about the things that he could do for Will, to improve his situation, and the ways in which he might change Will for the better, and of all the things that they might learn about each other. Hannibal is thinking of all of the things he might, through that shared intimacy, discover about himself.

He turns over in his mind a memory from only a few hours ago - a memory of tending to Will, of touching him and being touched, as he knelt before Will and lifted his hand, manipulating Will's fingers as he cut and filed Will's nails for him.

Will's fingers were graceful and long, his skin soft and unwrinkled by the salt water, but his nails were ragged, some of them too long and others torn down past the quick. In Will's battered hands and damaged nails Hannibal could read the record of the siren's time in captivity, and he had pictured as vividly as if it were his own memory the way that Will must have torn at the chain around his neck and beat his fists against the wall, anything he could think of to get free of predators who seemed intent on eating him piece by piece.

The circumstances Will found himself in when he was at the mercy of the poachers who captured him are not entirely unfamiliar. Hannibal, too, has been helpless and alone in the dark.

He is thinking now of how much he will enjoy aiding Will in his grooming tomorrow, of working out the knots and tangles that have accumulated in his hair since he was taken captive - Hannibal is quite sure Will took good care of his hair when he was free - and of trimming that hair so it looks more even and neat.

He is thinking of things further down the road, too, of the gratitude he can expect when Will sees the new pool, and of what it will be like to bring Will live prey and to watch him kill it, to be a part of that process and to prepare the meat and eat it together.

It will be entirely safe for him to allow Will to see his joy in every aspect of that process.

It is a pleasure that he never expected to enjoy.

So he is thinking not of sex with Will when he comes, but of Will's potentialities. He does this quite silently, in order to avoid disturbing Will, still in the tub in the adjoining bathroom.

Hannibal lays still for a time, in no special hurry to go clean up, still lost in thought. He is still under the covers, resting but not sleeping, when he hears the splashing Will makes as he pulls himself out of the tub and flops onto the tile floor.

There are more sounds, and then the bathroom door creaks open. Hannibal lays silently, keeps his breathing even, waiting to see what Will will do.

He supposes, in retrospect, that he knew Will could get out of the bath if he was intent on doing so, but that possibility hadn't seemed like a threat to him.

That was why I didn't take the trouble to close the bathroom door, Hannibal thinks, but then corrects himself, because that isn't the truth; he simply hadn't wanted to put a barrier between the two of them by latching the door.

Now, Will is dragging himself across the hardwood floor, towards Hannibal, and silently Hannibal shifts his hand so his fingers tangle over the side of the bed.

A test, to see if the siren will take advantage.

Bait.

Will comes to a stop by the side of the bed, just below Hannibal's dangling fingers. There is a long moment of silence in which Hannibal is certain that Will is looking up at him from the floor below, though Hannibal's eyes are still closed and so he does not actually see this.

Will reaches up and tugs on Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal does not respond, still pretending to be asleep, and Will pulls harder.

He makes a trilling, anxious vocalization, the first sounds that Hannibal has heard him make so far, and tugs at Hannibal's hand again. The noise pulls at Hannibal's heartstrings.

Hannibal sits up, breaking Will's loose hold on his hand, and pushes the sheets to the side.

He's as naked as Will is, and he wonders, for a moment, if his genitals will disturb Will, but dismisses the thought as absurd. The siren is a hunter of men. He will be intimately familiar with every aspect of human anatomy, inside and out.

The upper half of Will's body is propped up on his elbows, his long tail and fins curled behind him. A creature out of his own element.

He cranes his head back to look at Hannibal, and when Hannibal meets his eyes Will turns his head to look back at the open bathroom door before looking back to Hannibal, and this time he tugs at Hannibal's ankle.

"What are you after?" Hannibal asks, but he thinks he understands.

He'd wondered, when he heard Will climbing from the bathtub, if the siren had heard or scented or even sensed Hannibal's own arousal. And he had been suspicious that the creature might intend to attack him while he was in bed and vulnerable.

Now, Hannibal thinks the answer is more basic; the siren was lonesome, alone in the bathroom, and he wants Hannibal's company.

Will tugs at his ankle again and makes that pleading trill again.

"I'll keep you company tonight," Hannibal says, and that earns for him a wide smile that shows only the first row of Will's many teeth. "But only this one time," he cautions.

Sloshing water from the bath over his own arms and chest in an attempt to avoid further damaging the protective coating over Will's scales, Hannibal helps Will back into the tub, scolding him for left in the first place, when being out of the water is doubtlessly bad for the siren's health.

Will is a social animal, Hannibal reminds himself, as he cleans up puddles in the bathroom and on the bedroom floor, before drawing on a pair of pajamas, *and is in a strange place after having suffered a great ordeal at the hands of poachers. It's natural for him to be anxious.*

There's no harm, really, he thinks, as he returns to the bathroom with an armload of blankets and pillows, which he spreads out on the newly dried floor beside the bathtub, *in indulging him, just for tonight.*

He lays down to sleep, close enough to Will's tub that the siren could easily reach down and touch Hannibal, should he require the comfort of touch.

The prospect doesn't trouble Hannibal; If Will meant to hurt him, he's already had a dozen chances to do so.

In the morning, it seems perfectly reasonable to Hannibal that he should cancel his appoints for the rest of the week in order to focus on bettering Will's accommodations and getting to better know him.

By the evening of that second day with Will in his life, it is event to Hannibal that he himself will not be able to sleep in a separate room from Will, and he invests in a trundle bed that can be rolled beneath his own bed when not in use.

It's the siren working his will on him, Hannibal knows, but it doesn't feel like an imposition. It means that the creature wants him nearby - that Will not only enjoys his company but is comforted by it, and there is a pleasure in being needed.

Chapter 5

For a time, the pool in the basement is enough.

The two of them kill together. They eat. They enjoy one another's company.

At first, Hannibal was hesitant about giving their prey an opportunity to harm Will, uncertain if he would be able to subdue a human without the benefit of his song.

He'd bond the hands of the first one behind his back and bled him halfway to catatonia before lowering him into the water for Will to do with as he pleased.

The man tried, rather listlessly, to kick at Hannibal when he dragged him across the basement floor to the pool, and when Hannibal lifted him up to its edge he'd found the will to buck in Hannibal's arms, crying out while he struggled to break free for fear of being drowned.

He calmed, almost at once, when Will propped his chin on the edge of the pool and looked down at him. The hour of that man's death had come, and Hannibal had made certain that he had no illusions on that point, yet he became plaint under Will's soft gaze.

The struggling ceased, and he allowed himself to be transferred from Hannibal's arms to Will's own. For perhaps the span of a minute, Will cradled him, his head propped above the water in Will's arms, and when he began to seem uneasy Will pursed his lips to make a hissing *shhhhh* sound that calmed him at once.

Will looked up at Hannibal then, and Hannibal felt in himself something akin the the sense of peace that had overpowered their prey. It is uncanny, even for his race, how easily Will can overcome the will of others. Hannibal is certain that he must have been a true terror before his faculties were compromised by the amputation of his tongue.

Hannibal watched as Will took the man by the upper arm and dragged him, unprotesting, to the bottom of the pool. His arm still entwined with that of the other to keep the man from floating back to the surface, Will laid on his side at the bottom of the pool in a languid position and watched the man's face as he drown.

The panic only began near the very end, during those last few lucid seconds before the lack of oxygen began to cause his brain to shut down, and by then it was of course too late.

There have been other kills since then, more ambitious and challenging projects. Will hasn't been as gentle with all of them as he was that first one, and sometimes Hannibal has taken a more active role.

Six in the span of barely a month. Even with Will's prestigious appetite, the freezers are close to overflowing. Hannibal has never burned so bright.

Lately though, Will has begun to lose interest in hunting, and in everything else. Will has taken to lying listlessly on the bottom of the pool for hours on end, and he isn't eating.

Hannibal might have considered medical explanations for Will's increasingly poor health, but he knows better.

He knows better because, on an increasingly intimate level, he now knows exactly what Will is feeling almost all of the time.

Exactly when the vague emotional pull towards Will and towards caring for Will's needs metaphorized into a profound empathetic connection is difficult to say. Hannibal did not, at first, perceive it as threatening; he was curious, rather, to find himself experiencing viscerally emotions that he'd previously understood only on an intellectual level, the conduit opened between the two of them feeding Hannibal a complex and ever shifting array of emotional impressions with a unprecedented degree of intensity.

The shine wore off more quickly than Hannibal expected.

It might have been alright - would in fact have been splendid - if Will's emotional state was better, but that is not the case, and nothing Hannibal has done to attempt to mitigate the shortcomings of the basement pool have lifted Will's ever growing depression.

Hannibal now experiences Will's own misery in a deeply personal manner, even when he is far from the siren; in fact, the ugly feelings that dog him are worse when he is away from Will, in large part because the siren can barely tolerate being alone. Solitude, even for half an hour, sends the siren spiraling.

What did you expect? Hannibal wonders now, looking down into Will's pool from the top landing of the stairs. *He's a wild creature, accustomed to having the entirety of the open sea as his playground. This was never going to be enough. Anything and everything you have to offer - good company and good food and the occasional murder - could never make up for what he had when he was free.*

It feels like a type of attack, when Will's feelings seize him, like Will is deliberately dragging Hannibal under with him, as though he was prey to be drowned. He cannot shake the sense that Will is using his own pain to manipulate Hannibal into something.

Will is dreaming.

In his dreams he is free again, and among his own people. When he opens his mouth he is able to speak - able to communicate, fully, his thoughts and feelings and desires.

It is at once everything he longs for and not enough, that dream, because in it Hannibal is nowhere to be seen. Will looks for him, among the other sirens - among faces that he has known since he was a hatchling - and finds only bones, long picked clean.

He flees then, from his family and everything he has ever known, and finds himself alone in the water but no longer free; walled in by the transparent strands of the poachers' net, and as he thrashes his tail and claws at the nylon netting he is hauled from the water and onto the deck of a ship.

He chokes back his fear and his rage and finds the breath to sing, bids the sailors not to die for him but to simply let him go free, but they are all wearing some strange bit of clothing over their ears, and they do not hear and therefore they do not listen, and the top of the net is loosened but only in order for two of the men to reach inside and haul him out by the wrists, and then there are men all around him.

The men holding his arms do not let go. They kneel on the deck and pin him against the boards, and a heavy man straddles his tail to keep him from thrashing. Rough hands grab him by the sides of his head, holding it immobile, and another grasps him by the jaw and wrenches his mouth open.

Something cold and metal is inserted into his mouth, holding his jaw open, and there is the invasion of fingers and the blinding pain of the knife. There is the strange sudden vacancy where his tongue used to be, the sensation of choking on the sudden salt flood of his own blood, and then the searing agony of the cauterizing iron.

There's the steel collar around his neck, then, and the darkness of the ship's hold, and the grinding misery of the butcher's shop, awaiting slaughter in a small tub of filthy water, and Will has been cruel in his day - oh yes, he has taken great sport in extending the pain and terror of the men that he hunts - but never would he have conceived of doing to another such a thing as has been done to him, but he waits, day after day and night after night for death to come at last.

And there is the shock of meeting Hannibal's eyes for the first time, of seeing in them the same joyous vicious spark that burns in his own. Everything and everyone is Hannibal's meat, but he recognizes in Will the same spirit that dwells within himself, and though the terror is overwhelming as he waits for the butcher's club to fall, to be truly *seen* once again before he dies is a rare gift, the only thing approaching kindness he has received since he was taken captive, and -

And sound of Hannibal's footsteps on the stairs wakes Will.

He feels more exhausted than he was before he fell asleep, but he rallies himself and swims to the edge of the pool.

Hannibal stands watching him with tired eyes, well outside of Will's reach.

"What is it you want from me?" Hannibal wonders.

You, Will would say, if he could speak. *I want you.*

Instead, Will stretches his arm out as far as it will go, eager for Hannibal to move close enough to touch him.

Before the poachers took him, Will was almost never alone. Always there were intimate friends nearby, and he was almost constantly touching someone else or being touched.

He does not think that Hannibal fully realized, at first, how difficult it is for Will to be alone. Now that they are more closely bonded Hannibal understands the distress that isolation

provokes in Will, but Will fears that he resents that knowledge.

There are so many things that Will could articulate more clearly if he still had his tongue.

Among his people, Will knows, there are individuals who have at their disposal powerful magic. He believes that if he could make a deal with one of these individuals that his tongue might be restored to him, though such gifts always come with a high price.

Watching Hannibal now, Will wonders what he might give up in order to get what he needs.

"I wonder if you know what you're doing to me," Hannibal says to Will, and sees his own dull misery reflected in the siren's eyes. "I wonder if it would stop if I killed you, or if this would become my permanent state of being."

It's an empty threat. The two of them are conjoined, in some fundamental way now, and for Hannibal at least, breaking that connection would at this point be a species of suicide.

He wonders if separation would be as painful for Will.

Will is still reaching for him, fingers grasping at the open air ten inches in front of Hannibal's face. The siren makes a desperate, pleading sound.

Relenting, Hannibal moves within his reach, and instantly Will's hands are on him, touching his shoulders and his arms and the back of his neck. Fingers trace the curl of his ear and bury themselves in his hair.

"Would you stay with me," Hannibal wonders, "if you were free to go anywhere else?"

Will's fingers curl around the back of his skull, and he draws Hannibal closer, pressing his own forehead against Hannibal's.

That same day, Hannibal begins to make plans to return Will to the ocean.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal worried, of course, that the first moment Will's fins slid into the water he would melt into the waves, never to be seen again, but that doesn't happen.

Will is crueler than that. He allows them one good afternoon together before he abandons Hannibal.

It took some work to locate the isolated little cottage with its private beach and warm sheltered cove. He'd taught the siren how to use Google Earth to find a place that was at least similar to the location from which Will was kidnapped, though it is not clear to Hannibal if they are actually anywhere near his original hunting grounds.

He is slightly troubled by the idea that other sirens might call on them, seeking to entice Will back to them or to make meat of Hannibal or both, but he let Will pick the location of their new home anyway. If Will is not satisfied, Hannibal thinks, with less resentment than he might have expected, Hannibal himself won't be able to be happy either.

Transporting Will such a long distance was another challenge, but they are here now, the two of them, and when Hannibal backs the truck down to the edge of the boat ramp, getting as close to the water as possible, and walks around to the back to let Will out, he can hear the siren splashing around impatiently.

When Hannibal opens the back of the truck to help Will out of the high-sided, half-filled tank, the siren doesn't wait to be carried down to the water. He squirms out of Hannibal's arms and down to the ground, and supporting himself on the palms of his hands, wiggles his way down the ramp and into the waves.

Hannibal holds his breath, waiting to see if the siren will disappear, and Will makes a wide circle, taking in the entirety of the sheltered cove, and then loops back to Hannibal, and when he rises from the water his grin is full of the purest elation, and Hannibal feels the smile mirrored on his own face and the same joy in his heart, and is, for a few hours more, certain that he has not made a mistake.

Will reaches for him, beckoning Hannibal to join him in the water, and Hannibal hesitates for only a moment before stripping out of his clothing and padding down the beach to slip into the water with Will.

It is, undoubtedly, the most dangerous thing he has done so far, joining Will in his own element when the siren no longer has no real incentive to keep him alive, save the affection he bears for Hannibal.

That Will cares for him is something that Hannibal does not doubt - he can feel Will's love, burning beneath his own skin - but he is not sure if that will be enough to keep the siren from

following his own instincts, now that he's free, and therefore no longer beholden upon Hannibal for survival.

But Will's playfulness with him is utterly harmless. He splashes water at Hannibal, and laughs while he brushes his sodden hair out of his eyes, but he doesn't try to pull Hannibal under.

Hannibal sets out to make a circuit of the small cove, and at first Will takes it as a game of chase, but though Hannibal is a strong swimmer Will outpaces him with startling ease. He flirts and flips through the water, swimming effortless loops around Hannibal while Hannibal cuts doggedly through the water, until the both of them have returned to the shallows near the shore.

Will curls his tail around the small of Hannibal's back, looping his long body around him, and then rests his head on Hannibal's thigh. The siren looks up at Hannibal through the bluish filter of the water, adoration in his eyes.

Hannibal has felt gratitude from the siren before, many times, but never before has he experienced such raw unfiltered joy. The emotions flooding him now are utterly overwhelming for all their beauty, and Hannibal finds himself on the verge of tears.

Bashful, Hannibal breaks eye contact, turning his head to the side. Will reaches up, brushing Hannibal's cheek with his fingers, and when Hannibal leans into the touch Will is delighted by the rasp of the salt-and-pepper stubble against his skin. Will's own face is smoothly naked of facial hair.

Will wonders what that would be like, being able to grow a beard, as he assumes Hannibal would be able to do were he to stop shaving. He wonders if he would like it.

Curiously, Will snakes around Hannibal, observing all of the ways Hannibal's unclothed body is different from his own. Hannibal's legs are sticking out straight in front of him, toes braced in the sand against the gentle buffeting of the waves, and fluttering along the sandy ocean floor, Will comes to the ends of Hannibal's feet and then turns to face him.

Checking Hannibal's face to see if it is alright, he lifts one of Hannibal's feet at the ankle and studies it, the shape of the toes and the arc of the foot, which he traces with his edge of his finger. That touch makes Hannibal's foot jerk in his hand, and alarmed Will looks up in time to see Hannibal's face open up to a short and almost voiceless laugh.

Will tilts his head to the side questioningly, and Hannibal says, "Ticklish."

His hands move on, tracing the shape of the bones in Hannibal's ankle, feeling the sinewy hardness of the calf muscle and the coarseness of his leg hair. Already, his skin is starting to prune from the water.

He is well familiar with human anatomy, of course, but before Hannibal he'd never had a chance to explore the entirety of a living human body with such intimacy - would never have

imagined wanting to do such a thing.

In the normal course of things, the flesh under his hands would be nothing more than meat, to be torn apart and eaten, the bones and gristle and tough hunks of skin discarded, cast aside for the bottom feeders.

In the normal course of things, he would not have come to love a human - would never, in fact, have loved a single individual with the intense focus with which he loves Hannibal. Correctly or not, Will does not believe he is doing anything to manipulate Hannibal into feeling the same way.

His hands move on, leaning over the human as he feels out the shape of Hannibal's powerful thighs, parting his legs a little so he can touch the skin on the insides of his legs, which is a little softer, the hair there more sparse and feathery, watching as his hands move that extra thing that Hannibal has given no name to, but that hangs below his belly at the juncture where Hannibal's legs met his body.

Will wonders what it would be like to have such a thing, and how he would feel if Hannibal were to touch it, and he wonders what it would be like to have legs, to balance on those precarious looking feet and to don clothing and shoes and go walking, side by side with Hannibal, to hunt with him unsuspected among the humans.

He would like to find the answers to all of those questions and more.

"Don't," Hannibal says, but reluctantly, when Will's fingers begin to slide down his groin and toward the base of his cock.

Will looks up at his voice, and Hannibal see the avid curiosity in Will's wide eyes, and his pique at having been interrupted.

"I wouldn't like to take advantage of you," he explains, and Will makes a sour face that communicates to Hannibal, quite clearly, what he thinks of that notion.

Hannibal, himself, is not certain what motivated his objection - it is not as though he was not enjoying him, or that he had any doubt that Will was having fun, but he supposes that he is concerned that Will's current course of action might serve to remind Will of how alien Hannibal's own body is in comparison to that of the siren.

Will's fingers start to migrate towards Hannibal's cock again, but he watches Hannibal's face carefully, checking to see if he really meant it when he said no, and this time Hannibal makes no move to stop him.

Will doesn't really know what to do with it. His fingers flutter tentatively over the length of Hannibal's cock, and then more confidently he curls his hand around its middle, hefting it as though to gage its weight. Making his way towards the end, Will shifts the foreskin back tentatively, and leans in for a closer look when the head of Hannibal's cock peeks out.

Not wanting to alarm Will, Hannibal has very deliberately been working on keeping his body still and his breathing even, and relaxing back into this has by no means been a challenging task, but when Will runs the ball of his thumb over the slit experimentally Hannibal's cock jumps in Will's hand, and startled he draws his hand away and hides it behind his own back.

"That's alright, Will," he says, and reaches down to squeeze Will's shoulder reassuringly. Then, kenning suddenly what it is Will is worried about, Hannibal says, "You aren't hurting me. I wouldn't allow you to do this if I didn't enjoy it."

Will's smile is shy and relieved, and sweet enough to crack Hannibal's heart.

"Do you want me to show you what to do?" Hannibal asks, and Will nods eagerly, so Hannibal curls his own hand over Will's, shaping it around his cock and demonstrating how to work his hand over it, and once he gets the hang of it Will is enthusiastic and delighted, finding a rhythm now without any help, and Hannibal leans back and enjoys himself.

Will laughs, mystified and just a little alarmed, when Hannibal comes, clouding the water.

"Pleased with yourself, aren't you?" Hannibal says, still a little breathless, and Will grins up at him.

Will curls himself around Hannibal again, folding his arms over Hannibal's thighs and cradling his head in the nest they make, and as Hannibal reaches down to stroke his hair, he says, "You should be pleased. I know I am," and Will snuggles in closer to him.

Will sleeps like that for nearly two hours, and though Hannibal's legs go numb from the weight and though he knows that there are things up in the cottage that he should be tending to, Hannibal is in no hurry for him to move.

When Hannibal leaves to put dinner together, up in the cottage, he is not particularly anxious about the prospect that Will might not be there when he comes back. He can feel Will's desire to be close to him, and he trusts it, as much as the predator inside him trusts anything.

They watch the sunset together, while they eat, and when Hannibal says, "This is a marked improvement on the basement," he knows that he is saying what they're both thinking.

He is trying to resolve, in his own mind, what the sleeping arrangements ought to be for the night; the idea of sleeping apart had seemed feasible when he rented the cottage, but now the idea of spending the night inside while Will remains so far away feel intolerable.

It will be chilly out tonight, and Hannibal's joints aren't quite as forgiving as they once were, and it might be too cold for Will's comfort, and he is thinking about inquiring if Will might consent to sleep in the bathtub until they have found some better solution for the problem, when Will begins another lap around the cove.

This time he stops at the gap between the partial ring of stone walls, staring out at the open ocean for so long that Hannibal begins to second-guess his previous confidence. He can feel,

squirming in his own heart, Will's uncertainty, and he feels it when Will makes a decision.

Will looks back at him, and when he returns to Hannibal he does it in a straight line, his powerful tail bringing him to Hannibal quickly.

The siren takes Hannibal's hand in his own and pats it, reassuringly, three times, before giving it a light squeeze. It is the same gesture that Hannibal has come to use whenever he needed to leave Will to complete some task; it means, "I will be back soon."

Hannibal doesn't try to stop him from leaving. He can feel no deception coming off the siren, no desire to flee from him or otherwise cause him harm, though there is a great longing for something Hannibal cannot name.

Watching the way Will glances back at him, just before he disappears through the mouth of the cove, Hannibal is sure that he will be back.

That certainty starts to crack almost at once, and by this time tomorrow it will be in utter ruins.

He busies himself in the cottage, playing house while the darkness falls. At first, he only goes down to the beach to call Will's name while he aims a powerful flashlight out across the cove once every hour, but for very long it becomes every half an hour, and then he finds himself spending more time standing on the beach than being productive inside the cottage.

All this worrying, he tells himself, a melodramatic overreaction to the situation. Will is safe, wherever he is, and has simply stopped to sleep for the night, but will return shortly after the sun comes up.

The effort to bring himself under control is largely futile. When it regards Will, Hannibal has found himself to be very much lacking in self-restraint, and this is worse than it's ever been.

Though he forces himself to lay down in bed for a few hours, Hannibal gets little sleep. When he does doze, he dreams of open water and of secret, hidden places along the bottom of the ocean, and he dreams of seeking something that is always frustratingly out of reach.

I won't rush down to the beach, he tells himself, as he climbs out of bed. *I will shower and brush my teeth, and then I will have a cup of coffee, and only then will I go greet Will.*

He tries, with an alarming desperation, to convince himself that Will is down there waiting for him, but the uncertainty is unbearable, and Hannibal finds himself padding his way back down to the shore barefoot and still dressed in his pajamas.

No Will.

Hannibal is fully conscious, as the hours tick by without the siren's return, that he losing track of himself, passing into some new realm of insanity. He can feel Will - or rather, the desperate need to be with Will - pulling at him, as though he's been hooked through the navel and someone or something is trying to reel him in.

That pull is so strong that he can't resist it, and more alarmingly he doesn't *want* to. Neither his body nor his will seem to be under his own control anymore, and Hannibal spends most of that day standing on the beach, letting the waves lap against his ankles and looking out over the water until his head aches.

By sunset, he is dizzy from dehydration and badly sunburned, and he staggers back to the cottage, where he allows himself a single glass of water, lest he risk vomiting by taking more. The Pull is less strong now, and something in his gut suggests that means that Will is asleep now.

Hannibal puts lotion on his sunburn, drinks a bit more water, and falls into bed.

He is asleep at almost at once, deeply this time, and doesn't not awake until he finds himself naked in waist-deep water. Disorientated, Hannibal looks back towards the cottage, trying to understand how he got from there to the cove. Hannibal has no memory of even leaving bed.

Dawn is just breaking, and from where he stands Hannibal can see his pajamas lying wrinkled on the beach. For reasons that Hannibal does not understand, there is a folding knife in his hand, and without really thinking about it he twists at the waist and throws it back to the beach, where it lands in the sand right beside his night clothes, just above the tide-line.

And then he swims, following the desire or impulse or command of whatever part of Will that has buried so far down into his brain that Hannibal has no say in it anymore, and that tells him that he *must* go to Will, even if doing so means his death.

Hannibal is a strong swimmer. He is in excellent shape. He goes on swimming for hours before he wears down, despite the rough waves. He makea it so far out into the open sea that he can no longer see land, but eventually he has to stop.

So exhausted now that even staying afloat is a challenge, Hannibal bobs and sputters as the waves crash over him. He wonders, as night creeps in and everything around him fades to black, if Will has done this to him on purpose, if he always intended to drown Hannibal.

It's curious, Hannibal thinks, as he starts to go under for the last time, how he can simultaneously feel both so proud and so badly wounded.

Chapter End Notes

This got just a little longer than I planned, so now looking at nine or ten chapters.

We may, very soon, see some other familiar faces in a new context...

Chapter 7

It has never been Will's intention to harm Hannibal.

He knows that his love is in a bad way, that he is longing for Will's return, and Will's own heart aches with him, but there is in Will a stubborn desire to not return until he is whole and unscarred and able to speak to Hannibal with his own voice.

There's a perversity to it, that unflagging love that he feels for Hannibal, a being who should be to him nothing more than meat, and Will's awareness that his own people will never be able to accept such a thing clouds his thoughts even as he seeks them out.

It's not the company of other sirens that Will is intent upon obtaining - he has already made up his mind in that regard, and has chosen Hannibal - but he requires guidance.

There are, he is quite certain, beings out there that can restore to him what he's lost, but Will is unsure as to where they might be found - and what kind of payment they might demand for the service.

These waters are unfamiliar to Will, but he believed that if he went out far enough he would be able to sense the presence of other sirens, but he has been swimming for hours now and all he can feel is Hannibal, who is becoming increasingly distressed by Will's absence.

Will feels Hannibal's wooziness and exhaustion, coupled with wounded longing. There is anger in it, too, a simmering heat that almost distracts, as night begins to fall, from Will's awareness of how cold Hannibal has become.

The anger doesn't worry Will very much - he imagines returning to the homely little cove that Hannibal brought them to, rising out of the water to speak to him, his very ability to once again speak serving in its own right as explanation enough for why Will left him behind, and watching the hurt and rage bleed out of Hannibal to be replaced by a joyous recognition that his own feelings have been returned in full.

It's when that anger starts to shift into… not fear exactly, but a kind of bitter resignation, Will starts to become frightened for him.

Will abandons his hunt and turns back the way he came, cutting through the water as quickly as he can.

There is a tightness in his chest now, that will not go away, and it has nothing to do with his own exhaustion; Hannibal is floundering. Choking on seawater, barely keeping his head above the surface, and Will's awareness of the aching exhaustion in his icy cold limbs is like a beacon - a lighthouse flashing out over the water to return him to his love.

When that light starts to dim, Will becomes truly afraid.

Finding energy reserves that he thought were tapped out, Will surges forward through the choppy water, so close now but maybe already too late, and he catches Hannibal in his arms as he sinks down into the dark depths, hauls him up to the surface and tilts his head back, above the water.

Hannibal is not dead.

His breathing is harsh, a rasp coming up from the depths of his chest as his body tries to suck in enough air. He is shivering so hard that the shaking borderlines on convulsions, but he's alive.

He does not speak, as Will hauls him back towards the distant cove, though it takes hours for the pair of them to reach the beach.

Hannibal's emotions are foggy to Will, jumbled and dim, and Will is so focused on getting Hannibal safely back to land that he does not pay them much mind.

Even as bad as things have gone, Will still believes that he will be forgiven - that the love that he knows Hannibal holds for him will be a protection for him.

Later, when Will is bleeding out alone on the ocean floor, wounded and bereft of everything and waiting for some larger predator to come along and end his troubles, he'll come to understand how mistaken he was.

When Hannibal's mind is clear enough to allow for lucid thoughts again, what he thinks is, *The situation is such that if Will leaves I will, apparently, kill myself.*

Paired with everything else, all of the ways he has upended his own life to please the siren and to enjoy the siren's pleasures, this conclusion is utterly unacceptable.

I can't allow my life to depend upon the whims of a wild creature.

Wary of how much Will may be able to intuit, as soon as he has thought this thought he shuffles it away without following it to its necessary conclusion, secreting it all in the dim dark places inside his head.

But maybe he is not as successful in hiding his thoughts away as he might have hoped, because once Hannibal feels sand under him, Will releases him but then hangs back, in the shallows, while Hannibal drags himself up the beach.

Then the knife that he'd cast aside upon entering the water is under Hannibal's hand, and grasping it with icy fingers he stands and turns to Will.

Moving with all the dignity he can manage, naked and half-dead of exhaustion, Hannibal doesn't attempt to hide the blade as he advances on Will. He focuses on Will's face, on the raw hope and fear that he sees there as Will looks back at him.

The voice of Hannibal's medical training is in his head, warning him that he is in the grips of hypothermia, as well as being severely dehydrated, and that if he is not careful now he might yet slip past the point of no return.

Hannibal's feet tangle under him, but only because he allows them to, and alarmed Will moves forward, hauling himself up the beach to reach out and touch Hannibal, and when he does Hannibal lashes out with the knife. The blade bounces off Will's ribs - poor aim with a poor tool for a poor attempt that is almost unprecedented in Hannibal's experience at hurting and killing - and exercising what little control he has over the blade Hannibal redirects it to slice across Will's belly.

The resulting wound, though not what Hannibal was aiming for, is by no means shallow. It does not go deep enough to gut Will, but the blood comes flowing on in a brilliant red tide.

Will sucks air in hard, and with the exhalation comes a low whimpering that freezes every muscle in Hannibal's body.

He's known that Will has been exercising some degree of control over him from the very beginning, but Hannibal has always believed that he would be able to overpower the siren's will, were it to become necessary.

Now, he kneels in the sand, held immobile by Will's inarticulate expression of pain, as helpless as if he'd been injected with a paralytic.

The knife slips from Hannibal's grasp and falls into the sand. Later, the tide will wash that knife out to sea, carrying it to the hands of one who will use it with a much different intent.

Will's eyes are on Hannibal, huge and glassy and wet, and the sense of loss in them tears at Hannibal. He'd like to take it back, now that it's too late, to draw Will close to him and stitch up the wound before it kills him, but he can do nothing but watch as Will drags himself painfully back into the water and disappears into the waves, leaving nothing behind but a red smear on the sand.

The pull that dragged him into the ocean in pursuit of Will never really goes away for Hannibal, but it becomes considerably less powerful. In the days that follow, as he watches and waits without any real hope for some sign of Will, Hannibal wonders why that is.

He would like to imagine that the pull is weaker because Will is still convalescing from his wound, or perhaps that Will has traveled so far away that the link that binds them is stretched thin.

There's hope in those possibilities, but Hannibal knows perfectly well that it's a fool's hope. He saw the cut he laid across Will's stomach, and knows that without help there is very little chance of him recovering. Most likely, Will is dead, and whatever pull Hannibal is still feeling is just an after-effect, like the ache of a phantom limb.

The worst scenario, out of all the options, is that he has broken Will's heart so severely that he simply no longer wants Hannibal - that when he cut Will he cut out whatever connection bound them together.

Even if Will is still alive, Hannibal is quite sure that the siren will be too wary to ever approach him again.

Eventually, for lack of any better options, Hannibal returns to Baltimore.

Chapter 8

Will's search for his own people hasn't been fruitless after all.

Half a dozen of them have been pulled in by the broadcast call of his desire for them and his distress, just as Will was called back to Hannibal, and perhaps also by the scent of blood in the water, but they don't come very close.

They watch him, laying on his side on the ocean floor, curled in on himself like a dead shrimp, hands splayed over his bleeding belly.

He turns his head to look up at them, pleading with his eyes as he stares into the familiar faces. The bright noonday sun makes the water that they float in shimmer.

They seem unreal to him, those other sirens, made of gemstones and just as cold. He tries to go to them anyways, though moving renews the agony that fills his exhausted body and makes the wound open up and begin to weep blood more quickly.

Will knows that he is moving like a broken thing, that he looks weak and helpless and doomed to death, but with his tongue gone he can neither contest these conclusions or beg for help or tell them how badly afraid he is of dying alone.

They leave him behind, only one or two bothering to look back at him sadly, and Will sinks back to the ocean floor and lays there on his side again.

I didn't want them anyway, he tells himself, furious in his wounded helplessness.

Will knows who he wants, and all the reasons why he shouldn't. Not having him here now, at the end of things, hurts so badly that Will thinks that the lonesomeness would kill him, were he not already dying.

He can taste his own blood in the water, filtering through his gills, as he waits for death, wondering if it will come upon him quietly or if some predator will scent the blood and come for him - tear him limb from limb, or maybe rip out his throat the same way Will has done to so many humans.

He drifts for a while, inside the hypovolemic haze of his mind, and when he becomes aware of the world again there is a dark shadow hovering over him.

When he looks up he sees… some kind of creature watching him. It is shaped more like a human than Will himself is, but it is at least twice as large as any man Will has ever seen, and he sees the mottled white and grey skin and the rows of bared triangular teeth and the sharp fins that adorn its thick tail and all of his instincts scream *shark!* and before his foggy brain can really register any of this his body is already attempting to flee, fingers scrabbling at the sand pathetically to pull himself forward while he tries to convince his tail to work properly, and though in his heart he knows that it's pointless and that he is dead either way he still tries to get away, and -

And the shark-man catches him, of course, and easily, drifting along side him for a few moments before reaching out to seize Will by the wrist, his huge, clawed hand as inexorable as the metal collar that held Will bond when he was imprisoned in the butcher's shop, and when the creature turns Will back to face him the entire world begins to spin sickly around him, the dim light fading in and out as Will gets another look at those big teeth, and then all at once everything goes dark.

The shark creature turns the siren's limp body over onto his back and finds the wound that he knew must be somewhere on his body, breathing in through his gills the taste-scent of the blood that flows sluggishly from it.

It's a human thing, that kind of wound, the work of a knife rather than tooth or claw. Unconsciously, he runs fingers over his own scarred face before leaning in close to the siren to peer at him. The siren's jaw dangles open, and his vision in the murky water is clear enough that he can see the vacancy where a tongue ought to be.

For a moment he thinks that the siren might be dead already, but he sees life fluttering in the movements of the siren's gills.

Still breathing.

That's good. He'd thought perhaps the siren died of fright at the sight of him.

He lifts the small creature up, cradling the siren against his chest, and carries him off to show this new discovery to his lover.

Chapter 9

There's a voice, in the place where Will wakes up, confident but not unkind; a good voice, and though his brain is too foggy for him to make sense of the words they calm him, despite the pain he's in.

A heavy hand sits on his chest, holding him down against a smooth rock ledge, and something sharp is stinging at his belly, again and again and again, and Will is conscious of his own agony but barely concerned by it, and the voice is still talking to him.

Will lifts his head, looking around for the source of the voice, and sees instead the crown of the sharkman's head, kneeling over him.

Will can't see what he's doing, but whatever it is causes him hurt.

Is he eating me? Will wonders, but without much care.

He's having a lot of trouble feeling worried about anything right now, and he knows that the voice is at the heart of that, that the owner of the voice echoing pleasantly from every direction is not a siren but is kin to sirens, and still looking around the cavern Will opens his mouth and says, "Where are you?" and heartbeats go by before he realizes that he's just spoken out loud.

Stunned, he reaches inside his own mouth to find nothing there - just the vacancy where he was cut. Will wonders if he simply imagined speaking, but before he can attempt to say anything else exhaustion closes in over him again.

Tentacles, drifting down from the roof of the cavern and into Will's line of sight, their undersides vividly colored in red and purple, their tops matte black. Watching through nearly closed eyes, Will holds very still and pretends to still be unconscious as the tentacles make their way down the stone wall, touching as they go - examining, feeling, taking in everything around them.

A torso comes into view, followed by hands and arms, the clever fingers moving along the rock in the same way that the tentacles do. Finally, he sees the face of the seawitch - and Will is quite certain that is what and who she is - calm and intelligent but not looking at him, her head turned to the side instead.

Listening.

The sharkman goes to her, and his much larger frame is at once engulfed in the bright tentacles. They curl around his legs and his waist and his upper arms, drawing him close

against her, and she props her chin of his shoulder and holds out her hands, cupped loosely together, so he can sign into them.

Will remembers the poachers' net and wonders how the sharkman doesn't feel trapped, but he seems quite calm as he makes the signs, leaning back into her embrace as he crowds his big hands inside hers, at times touching points on her body to communicate further details.

The only reason Will fully understands that he is making a kind of silent talking is because of his own experience with Hannibal, who had tried to teach him both signing and written language. He'd no luck whatsoever in learning either, and gave it up quickly as a useless effort.

At the time, Will was certain that the flaw could be found in his own nature - that he was made for song, not signs or marks on paper, but watching the sharkman now Will feels as though he can glean at least some sense of what he is saying.

Later, once he has become proficient in understanding what the silent one has to say, Will will decide that he is able to learn to understand him because he thinks in those signs, whereas Hannibal was attempting to communicate in a language he himself didn't really know.

"He's dangerous," the seawitch says in a soft voice.

There's a pause then, the silent one asking a question in his own way.

"No," she agrees, "not to us. But he is dangerous."

Will sits up, and in doing so becomes acutely aware of how little pain he is in.

His hands go to his belly, fingertips finding the stitches even before he can look down and see the thread, glowing faintly with its own inner light, binding the nearly healed wound together.

The sense of wonder Will feels upon seeing that takes him by surprise; after all, he'd known such things could be done - this all started with him seeking out someone capable of healing much more profound hurts.

Perhaps it's the kindness of the thing that stuns him. Will expected any help to come at a price. Then he wonders if he has unknowingly incurred some debt.

Taking something from his lover's hands, the sharkman moves toward Will, looming over him.

There is nothing deliberately threatening about the way that he holds himself, but he is so big and all of Will's instincts tell him to flee before the larger predator.

Will draws his tail in against his belly and curls his arms around himself.

"Is he going to hurt me?" Will asks the seawitch, and is dumbfounded all over again by the sound of his own voice. He'd thought that the last time was only a dream.

How? he wants to say, or maybe *Why?* but now that he can speak again he seems to have lost all ability to recall words.

A frown forms on the seawitch's face, and that scares Will almost as much as the flash of something metal that he sees in the sharkman's palm, because he's certain that she can easily undo whatever it is she's done for him.

"My lover can hear you and he understands what you have to say," she tells Will. "You wouldn't speak as though that isn't the case again."

"I'm sorry," Will says, meekly, and hugs his own tail more tightly.

Then he turns his head to look up at the sharkman. "I'm sorry," he says again, louder this time. "I didn't mean to insult you."

The sharkman shrugs with one shoulder, then leans over Will and takes him by the forearm, pulling his clasped hands apart.

Will glances toward the seawitch frantically. "What is -" he starts, but stops himself before he says the rest; *What is he going to do to me?*

Instead, Will makes himself look the sharkman in the face, and trying not to be disturbed by his flat black eyes, says, "What do you want me to do?"

The seawitch says, "He needs to take the stitches out. Lean back."

Will does that, trying to conceal his reluctance.

Leaning back on his elbows, Will gets his first good look at what the sharkman has in his hand; a pair of golden scissors, almost laughably small in the giant's hand. But he uses them deftly enough, snipping the end of the thread and drawing the stitches free.

It hurts, and this time the seawitch doesn't do anything to stop it the pain from mattering to him, but it's only a small hurt.

"It's a minor spell, that's allowing you to speak," she tells Will. "It's not permanent, and if you stray too far from here it won't last. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," Will says, rolling the words around inside his mouth. Whatever is animating his speech feels indistinguishable yet decidedly different from his lost tongue.

Will watches tiny beads of blood from the stitch-marks diffuse into the still water as the sharkman returns the shining thread and the scissors to the seawitch. They disappear into her coiling tentacles.

He wonders if the two of them have names, and if he should ask for them. Before Hannibal, Will himself never had a name, nor did he know anyone else who did.

"How do you feel?" she asks him, and Will blinks at that. It takes him a moment to understand that she is asking about the wound.

“It looks almost completely better,” he says, “and it doesn’t hurt. But…”

“But you feel ill?” she prompts.

Will nods at that, but then realizing his mistake he adds, “Yes. And weak. I can’t make things link up, inside my head.”

“You nearly bled to death,” the seawitch says. “And it’s been a long time since you’ve had food.

“You’ll eat with us tonight,” she tells Will, and then turns and carries herself deep into the cavern, disappearing into shadows that Will’s eyes cannot penetrate.

Chapter 10

They don't eat what Will is used to eating, but in some ways that comes as a relief.

The hunting of men has, for Will, become tangled up with Hannibal in ways that are still too painful to poke at. Will would much rather bear the vague unsated gnawing in his gut that comes from feeding solely upon the smaller creatures that share the ocean with them than to have to confront that particular unhealed wound.

He takes what's offered to him, and doesn't ask for more.

Later, when his body is fully healed, he will begin to earn his own keep, but food is not the only thing Will is gifted, in those early days with the seawitch and her lover.

They listen to him.

With his newly regained ability to speak the words come out of Will like an unending hemorrhage. All the pain and terror and grinding misery that followed the ice moment when he realized that he'd been caught up in the fishing net, the joy of meeting Hannibal's eyes in the butchershop and finally being *seen* , the relief of being taken home by Hannibal and the pleasure in his company but also the lonesomeness that came on when he was left alone in the basement pool - the trust and the suspicions and the growing realization that what he was feeling for the human man was love and that the love he was feeling went both ways, but how that love didn't seem to matter anymore once Hannibal decided that Will set out to hurt him.

Before very long, Will tells them almost everything.

Meals with the seawitch and her lover are a calmer affair than they'd ever been when Will was among other sirens.

Here there are no final screams converted into torrents of bubbles by the convulsing men as they choke on seawater, blood and breath flowing out of the bodies as they were converted to nothing more than fuel to feed himself and his family. There's no feeding frenzy and no squabbling over scraps, and no long naps piled on top of one another, a tangle of contented arms and tails and bodies as they slept off the glut of a big meal.

With the three of them reclined around the low table, Will's long tail tucked beneath him and out to the side, it feels almost like dining with Hannibal, though there is considerably less pageantry involved in these simple meals of fish and mollusks and kelp and crab.

He's been with the seawitch and her lover for several days when, over their midday meal, she says to Will, "You don't intend to return to your own people."

Will's hand goes to his belly, curling over the scar Hannibal gave him. The seawitch's magic is strong, and the thing is almost entirely healed by now. Its dull ache reminds Will of how much he's lost.

"There's no point in that," Will tells her, watching her hands as he speaks, tracking the way she uses a sharp knife and clever fingers to force open the oyster that she's taken from the bowl in front of her, before picking the meat from the shell. "Even if they'd have me, I'll never fit in with them now."

Will is acutely aware of all the ways in which he has become alien to the people he spent his entire life with, up until Hannibal, but most of all he can't shake the knowledge that they would never be able to understand, much less accept, the way he felt - *feels* - for the human.

They'd kill Hannibal on sight, he knows, reduce him to nothing more than bones and a few chunks of bloody hair within an hour's time, and for this reason Will knows that he will never again be able to feel at peace among other sirens, especially when he can still feel the way that the bond between the two of them is still trying to pull them back together again.

"I want things that are too complicated for other sirens to understand now," he says, looking away despite the fact that he knows she can't see him. "But I still can't understand what Hannibal wants, though I can still feel him wanting me."

"What does that feel like?" she asks him.

"It hurts," Will says. "Hannibal's wanting hurts like the twist of a knife in my belly." He pauses, sensing that she will disapprove of his conclusions. "It's hurting Hannibal the same way, but maybe it's worse for him because he understands it even less than I do."

He pauses, stunned by the sudden anger that is flooding him. Will wonders if that's Hannibal, too - if wherever Hannibal is he's angry right now, and if he's the source of that wounded rage.

"He thinks I did something wrong by loving him," Will says, speaking slowly as he tries to solidify the feeling into words. "That I did it to hurt him - made him love me so I could control him."

The seawitch sighs, and Will mirrors the sound an instant later. "Maybe I shouldn't have," he says softly. "Maybe I changed him in a way that hurt him, but I don't know what else I could have done…"

Then the anger is there again, and this time Will feels confident that it is all his own. In a fury of bubbles he bursts up from the seafloor, his tail lashing.

He reaches across the table, snatching one of the oysters from the seawitch's bowl. The bowl rattles. "A siren can love a human no more than you could love one of these clams," he tells her.

Out of the corner of his eye sees her lover moving closer to her, and senses the danger in the stiff and focused way he's holding himself; he'll crush Will against the rock wall of this little

grotto and tear his throat out in a matter of seconds if he thinks Will means to hurt the seawitch, Will knows.

But instead the seawitch reaches out to her lover, stroking his arm to pacify him, and Will watches some of the threat bleed out of the silent one, though he still watches Will with those steady, flat eyes.

“A human can be encouraged to love a siren,” Will goes on, dejected now instead of angry, “but only long enough to get them within arms’ reach.”

Chapter 11

“If you can fix me so I can talk again,” Will asks the seawitch a few days later, “why don’t you do the same for your lover? Why not heal yourself?”

Her blind eyes give away nothing, but often times the seawitch’s face reveals more than she means to show. Will sees the affront the question causes - the anger too - and is sorry for it, but he still wants to know.

When he was among other sirens no one ever thought to hesitate to speak their mind, and with Hannibal so many vital things went unsaid. Tact is something he is coming by slowly, and only through trial and error.

But the seawitch does not deign to answer directly.

“Do you think that you are broken?” she asks instead, turns her head to a slight angle - giving him her full attention, listening closely.

The question confuses Will. “They hurt me,” he says.

“The humans?”

“Yes.”

“And Hannibal?”

Will swallows and fees the phantom tongue press against the roof of his mouth. “Yes.”

“Is he someone who likes causing hurt?”

“I hurt him first,” Will says, but cagey now. He’s thinking about everyone he and Hannibal killed together. Her meat is different from the sort that Will is meant to take, and he doesn’t know if she would understand any of that, or accept it.

“I know what you are,” she tells him, and Will feels exposed under her sightless gaze. “I’m not sure that I know what it is you want. Do you?”

Will speaks without thinking. “I don’t want to be alone. I want to stay here, with the two of you.”

“Is that all you want?”

Will can’t find an answer. The phantom tongue is thick and stupid in his mouth.

It doesn’t matter, at least not for now. The seawitch is a more complicated creature than Will, and she is insightful. She knows that what he needs is time to heal.

He’ll tell her what he really wants of her when he himself knows.

“That’s fine,” she tells him. “There’s work for you here.”

As the days go by, Will finds that he is not nearly as frightened of the sharkman as he used to be.

They go out on foraging trips together, bringing back food and discarded human oddities and all manner of things that he seems to think the seawitch will like or need.

The quiet one has a keen imagination and a surprising sense of fun.

One day Will is rummaging around in the wreckage of a newly sunken yacht when he opens an algae-filmed wooden case and finds an array of fine silverware.

He lifts a fork from the box, allowing the lid to slide shut, and holds it up to the light filtering through the hole in the ship’s hull, remembering Hannibal; it was Hannibal who taught Will how to use such utensils, and the dull silver gleaming in the sunbeam reminds him of how the light would play through Hannibal’s hair.

A massive shadow passes over him, and suddenly terrified Will jerks his head towards it, just in time to see the sharkman diving toward him with astonishing speed.

He snatches the fork out of Will’s hand without slowing, the darts past him and out the hole in the hull.

Dumbfounded, Will looks out through the gap, his heart still thudding sickly in his chest.

Perhaps half a minute passes, and then the quiet one reappears through the hole through which he’d left. He holds the fork up and wiggles in back and forth in his hand, and Will recognizes the crude effort to tantalize but can’t fathom its intent.

Tucking the fork into the crook of his arm, the sharkman signs, “Chase me,” and though Will has never seen him use that particular set of gestures before he finds himself understanding, both because the signs are intuitive and because he can read the intent of their maker.

“I don’t -” he begins.

“Play,” the sharkman signs, slowly this time. And he repeats, “Chase me!”

An instant later he is moving again, maneuvering through the water with an astonishing grace that is nearly comparable to Will’s own, despite his great size, circling Will in a quick loop before tugging at the end of his tailfin and darting outside again.

Will follows, shooting through the water after the sharkman, and he’s not entirely sure if he manages to outrace the other creature or if he simply allowed himself to be snared, but when Will’s hand closes around his over-sized but *almost* human ankle all of his instincts light up, and he can see himself leveraging the hold he already has to haul himself up the sharkman’s

back, clinging on despite all efforts to shake him off and biting every spot he can reach until his prey was too dazed by the pain or too exhausted from blood loss to put up a fight. The sharkman wouldn't drown, of course, but if Will's teeth found his throat he'd choke on his own blood soon enough.

After that, Will could eat properly for a change.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to let those instincts take over, but Will doesn't want that. Instead, Will shifts his grip to give a stout tug on the sharkman's thick tail and then darts away, only pausing to glance back for a moment to make sure he's being followed.

As soon as he becomes the one being pursued Will's perception of the quiet one as an almost-human that he might prey upon is superseded by an awareness of being chased by an almost-shark that might easily opt to make a meal of him when - if - he catches Will, but there's little fear in it.

He's coming to understand that the sharkman took him for a friend almost from first glance; there's an uneasiness to that status, despite all his trust that he will not be harmed, that comes from not fully understanding why he was viewed as an exception.

The two of them play together until Will is worn out, and then the quiet one sinks down with Will to rest on the soft sandy ocean bottom.

Will feels good. The ache in his muscles makes him feel alive in his body, and it is such a good feeling, and one that he'd nearly forgotten.

"I was in a tank not much bigger than the inside of that ship," Will tells the quiet one. "Do you know what that is, a 'tank'?"

"I know," the sharkman signs.

The answer surprises Will.

Will studies him, and the sharkman pulls his scarred lip up into a more pronounced snarl and turns his head away, hiding his face from Will.

"I'm sorry," Will says, dropping his own eyes.

He knows that the sharkman doesn't like to be looked at, but it is hard to avoid it when there's still so much that he doesn't understand.

"Will you tell me what happened to you?" Will asks. His eyes dart up furtively to see if the quiet one will make any signs.

Instead, he lays his clawed hand carefully over the scar on Will's belly.

Will shivers.

He dreams of Hannibal almost every night.

In the dreams, Hannibal kills by himself.

Hannibal lets other people touch him, in the same ways that Will worked out how to touch, and Hannibal touches them too, but none of it leaves him feeling good in the same way that Will's touch made him feel.

He cooks for entire crowds of humans, but those meals don't mean the same thing to him that eating with Will meant.

When Hannibal returns to the seaside, Will knows.

Chapter 12

Three years go by, and there is nothing bright in Hannibal's life, really, only a terrible weight of lonesomeness.

He goes walking along the piers sometimes, justifying these excursion as trips to purchase fresh fish, but he knows he'll see nothing magical in the water beneath the docks.

The waters of the Chesapeake Bay are shallow.

Will is always under his skin, haunting him. It makes Hannibal reckless.

For months after he lost the siren Hannibal burned hotter than he ever had before. He killed not in sodders but in a quick and endless procession, the way that he and Will did when they were still together, but there was no brilliant joy to it.

Hannibal lured in a dozen dark-haired, beautiful men and cut them to ribbons, but the dull ache didn't fade.

He started to go further - to take chances that he never would have considered taking before he met Will, and he saw the potential for disaster, knew he was playing with fire that might burn down the carefully constructed card castle that was his public persona, and did not care.

When he and Bedelia meet for his appointments, Hannibal became more blatant and demanding than ever before, even as he found himself utterly unsated by their conversations, unmoved by the combination of fascination and fear with which she responds to the increasingly longer glimpses behind the veil that he allows her.

He's known from the start that it's unsustainable, and when the FBI finally closes in Hannibal is prepared.

The yacht he's purchased is registered under a false name, and is sturdy enough to bear transcontinental travel. He compels Bedelia's company, and though for a time traveling with her feels like a salve, though by the time they are truly alone on the open water her presence has instead come to irritate the wound in him instead.

Hannibal knows that he ought to point the ship towards Europe - or better, some more distant and isolated shore - and for a time they do rent dock space in Naples, but he is too restless to enjoy the city, and eventually he sets out on a meandering course down the southern coast of Africa, restocking the yacht's supplies in Mali, and then sets sail to cross the Atlantic, bound for the Caribbean and the little tropical cove where he'd intended to settle down and live out his life with the siren.

He does not actually return to the beach house, which has long been in the possession of new owners. When Hannibal lived there, for the short time that he did live there, he'd done so under his own name, and there's a great risk of being identified, but he finds dock place in a second-tier vacation town perhaps fifty miles away for the cottage.

After that, he and Bedelia only take the boat out for day-long pleasure cruises, taking in the natural beauty that surrounds them and fishing for their dinner, though sashimi no longer pleases him.

Food seems dull and flavorless, even when the meat is taken from men who died beneath his hands. There's no zest of life to it, and even when Bedelia watches him eat the proceeds of his hunts, knowing full well their province, Hannibal cannot relish his meals.

Bedelia will not eat meat at his table. She has lead a pescatarian existence since she learned of his dietary proclivities, and though there are many ways that he might have concealed something human into her food without her noticing the amusements of dining with an unknowing cannibal have grown stale.

Nothing else can compare to the charge in the air when Will plucked butcher's tongue tartar from Hannibal's fingertips.

Through all of this, Hannibal ignores the nagging from the rational part of his own brain, which suggests that he is not making his own choices in any of this, but is simply being led to where Will wants him to be.

There's a dissonance to that rational voice, because at the same time it insists that he knows exactly how deeply he cut Will, and that absent immediate professional medical care it was not survivable.

He is quite sure, almost all of the time, that Will is long dead, and he is only chasing after a ghost.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's ability to speak out loud really does fade away when he travels too far from the seawitch and her home, but he's learned other ways to communicate, and these days the idea of voicelessness does not distress Will the way it once did; the sharkman has taught him how to speak in signs, and much else besides.

Learning to read and use the hand signs was a long and difficult process for Will, and far different than his immediate intuitive understanding of Hannibal's speech, but with enough time and effort he was able to learn. Will is proud of that.

(And in the secret corners of his mind, curious if he might be able to teach this new language to Hannibal).

With the quiet one's help Will has also learned to hunt by his own wiles instead of through guile, and not just fish and crustaceans. Sometimes, the two of them take on richer game, such as seals and other aquatic mammals.

Astonishingly, and far beyond Will's own abilities, on occasion the sharkman will go on land to hunt game, downing fallow deer or feral goats and bring them back to the water to share, and that red meat goes a long way towards easing the constant hunger for his own habitual prey, though it never goes away entirely.

That hunger is, by now, an old friend, and one whose presence Will does not pay much mind.

They never hunt humans.

It was only recently - with the reawakening of the old ache that came when Hannibal was close but out of Will's sight and reach - that Will worked up the courage to ask why not.

The question invoked furious anger, as Will sensed it likely would, but the source of that anger remains unclear to him; the sharkman has only ever expressed hatred and fear of humans.

"Haven't you figured out that they don't tolerate being hunted?" he demands, and the sharpness of the clipped gestures communicated their own meaning; disgust and outrage, held in check now but bubbling inside his bones.

The anger frightens him, but there's such a weight of pain to it that Will can't draw away, not when the quiet one has been so good a friend to Will.

"If one of them are taken by a predator - or even if they drown through their own mistakes and the bottom feeders get to work cleaning up the mess - they kill a hundred common sharks and search their bellies for the scraps, and they shoot a dozen mermaids because at a distance

they can't tell the difference between kelp-eaters and your lot, and just for good measure they spear or trap or net anything else big and toothy that they can find."

There is a flash of insight, the kind Will only occasionally experiences with the seawitch and her lover, and he says, "That's what happened to your family."

Will reaches out to try to touch him, and the quiet one jerks away. "I don't have a family," he says. "There's only me."

"You have your lover," Will says. "You have me."

Will says this, not sure if it is a lie or not, but wanting it to be true - wanting it to help the quiet one in the way that it would help him if it was the truth.

He looks Will in the face, and under the regard of those stony black obsidian eyes which Will still cannot even begin to read, Will drops his own gaze.

But he tells Will about it anyway, when he asks, the story that he tells is so vivid and raw that Will feels as though he is watching with his own two eyes.

Will sees the sharkman when he was still very young and small, tangled in the nets among half a dozen much larger versions of himself as the fisherman pull them from the water. Clawed hands reach out toward the child to try to free him, then jerk in a death spasm when the captive bolt gun one of the men have pressed against the creature's forehead is triggered, cutting at the little one's face.

The little one is untangled from the net by rough hands, just like the ones that held Will down when they cut out his tongue, and he is taken back to one of the human's home and placed in an aquarium for crowds of humans to stare and squeal at him, until years later, when he manages to open the lid to his tank and, bone weary and dry-gilled to the point of near asphyxiation, walks back to the water under cover of night.

The fury is bigger than Will's body can contain, and he swims fast loops around the sharkman before stopping with a sudden jerk, floating in the water eye-level to him. "There is nothing I wouldn't give," he says, signing as well as speaking to emphasize his point, "to have a chance at the men who netted you. I'd strip the meat from their fingers just to hear them howl in inarticulate agony."

If there is something like gratitude in the sharkman's dark eyes, it is visible only for an instant. Then he turns his head away.

"You don't understand," he signs. "Humans put themselves above every other living thing. You can't beat them at cruelty - not even a creature like you can dream of beating them," and from his own capture and the time spent in the butchershop Will knows at least that much is true. "They lash out a thousand times harder in response to any hurt."

What the quiet one says next is not a non sequitur; Will's own hands are moving, unbidden, towards the scar on his belly.

“How many more times do they have to cut you before you see that?”

The sharkman goes away after that, too raw with hurt or anger or something that Will can’t name to be seen.

The seawitch does not remark upon his absence, but when he does come back she takes him back into the shadowy depths of her cave, and for hours Will can hear the murmur of her voice, talking him through the aftermath of the opening of old scars the same way that she talked Will through the healing of his own wound.

It puts Will to sleep, the sound of her voice, though he cannot make out the words, and when he wakes up the sharkman is gone again.

Dejected, Will goes out to wander on his own, and when the quiet one finds him he tries to apologize to Will with food.

Will lets him. He follows the quiet one to his favor hunting island, one far from any human boats or habitation, and watches from the shallows as the sharkman strides up onto the beach and disappears into the forest.

From almost the beginning, Will has wanted to ask the quiet one what it’s like to have legs, but at first he was too shy to ask the question, and now he worries about it being misinterpreted.

Instead, when the quiet one returns with a buck carcass that is more than big enough to glut them both, Will says, “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He knows that the sharkman doesn’t really understand cruelty - any potential for violence in him is driven solely by hunger, or else a need to protect his loved ones - but that he knows that cruelty is ingrained in Will’s nature, and sometimes suspects that Will might direct it at him.

“I’m sorry,” Will adds, but the quiet one just shrugs.

“There’s nothing for it,” he tells Will.

“Hannibal,” Will says, unable to help himself, “is barely human at all. He’s more like a siren than anything else, really.”

“Lets eat,” the quiet one says, and it is as effective a way of changing the topic as anything else.

The venison leaves Will as close to feeling full as he has for a long time.

The quiet one never seems to sleep, but it is the kind of meal that leaves Will feeling contented and dozy, and he catches himself drifting off as they sit in companionable silence

on the ocean floor.

“Sleep,” the sharkman tells him. “I’ll keep watch.”

And feeling perfectly safe, Will does just that.

Chapter End Notes

I'm about to wade into prelim exam hell (wish me luck please), so for the next eleven days my life is not my own, but I'm hoping that I might be able to get the next chapter up during one of my brief down periods.

I'd really like to, because in the next one Will and Hannibal lay eyes on one another again.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> This one is short, I know, but it's necessary for pacing reasons that it stand alone.
>
> The next one is also going to be pretty small, but the final chapter (provided I don't end up breaking it in two and even if I do) is going to be a whale of a thing.

Will wakes from a dream of Hannibal to find the quiet one tugging urgently at his arm.

There's a shadow above them, and Will lifts his head and sees the yacht, drifting on the quiet water.

He is certain, suddenly, that it is Hannibal up there above them - that he has come looking for Will - and the thought at once chills and elates him.

The conflicting impulses leave Will muddled and dazed, and he allows his friend to pull him away from the human thing even as the boat begins to motor away.

"That was him," Will tries to say, but they've drifted too far away from the seawitch's grotto, and he cannot call upon the ability to speak out loud.

Will looks to the quiet one long enough to sign the words instead, then turns to stare off at the departing boat again, watching with naked longing as it grows smaller and smaller, fading into the horizon.

The quiet one grips him around the bicep, claws digging at Will's skin as he tugs at his arm for attention, and distractedly Will looks back at him.

"He'll take you away again and he'll keep you," the quiet one tells Will. "You'll never swim free again."

Will shakes his head in vehement denial. He has no intention of reprising his role as Hannibal's secret treasure, nor of allowing himself to languish away like a fish in a bowl ever again.

When he sees Hannibal again - and he is sure now that it is only a matter of time until they see each other again - Will intends to meet him as an equal.

There are things that he could explain to the quiet one - plans he could lay out, reassurances that he could make - but the boat is fading into the distance, and Will knows that the sharkman will not be easily swayed.

Deceit is the tool he brings to bear instead.

The sharkman is not cunning in the way that Will is cunning, and he isn't learned like Hannibal and the seawitch are. It is shamefully easy to fool him.

Will pretends to go along with the quiet one, to agree that he should put not only Hannibal but the entire human world behind him. He allows the sharkman to tug him in the opposite direction of the receding yacht, but the instant he loosens his hold on Will's wrist he darts away, shooting through the water in the direction that the ship went.

The quiet one chases after him for a long time, but he isn't fast enough to catch Will, and when they draw closer to human habitation the sharkman drops the chase.

Chapter 15

Hannibal steps down from the yacht and onto the dock, and there is an instant - just half a heart-beat of certainty that lights his entire being up with relief and gratitude - when he *thinks* that he sees Will watching him from below.

Will has returned, Hannibal is certain for that brief shining instant, peering up at him from through the gaps between the wooden dock slates, but then there is a tremendous splash and whatever it is he saw - if he saw anything at all - is gone as quickly as that, leaving Hannibal unable to tell if what he glimpsed was real at all or simply the product of his own forlorned imagination.

Uneasy, Hannibal continues on into town, but as he moves between the market stalls he finds himself, not for the first time, drawn to all the little garnishes and spices which Will enjoyed when paired with the meat of their kills.

“Hannibal still wants me,” Will tells the seawitch.

She and he are alone. The quiet one slunk away in wounded disgust when he saw Will, permitting Will to neither apologize for tricking him nor explain his intentions.

“So he does,” the seawitch agrees, resigned to the path that Will has already chosen. “And what do you want?”

When Will opens his mouth to answer the phantom tongue melts away like spun sugar in water.

There’s no great sense of loss at its passing; it wasn’t what he needed.

From somewhere among her coiling tentacles, the seawitch draws a knife.

Will takes it from her.

He knows what to do.

While Hannibal was away getting groceries, Will hauled himself up onto the yacht.

He slaughtered the interloper he found inside, crafting from the woman’s body a tableau evocative of their first meeting - the throat open, torn by teeth this time rather than opened by a blade, the tongue removed.

Now, having returned to discover all of this, Hannibal lifts his eyes from Bedelia's body to take in Will once again, posed regally on the kitchen table, his mouth and hands gleaming brightly with the still fresh blood.

A white plate sits on the table in front of him, and the crescent of tartare that adorns it appears to be surprisingly well made.

Hannibal wonders how Will managed to get on the counter to access the tools he needed, but then it occurs to him that he might have willed Bedelia to do most of the work herself, before he killed her.

Such manipulations, Hannibal knows well by now, are not beyond Will's ability, even robbed of his tongue. Nonetheless, Hannibal is quite certain that he himself is not under Will's sway now; all choices that he makes today will be solely his own.

The knife with which he wounded Will sits, gleaming, below the crescent of tartare. It glows with its own inner light, and Hannibal understands that there is some unfathomable magic to that, as inexplicable as Will's own abilities to read the desires and intentions of others and turn these things to his own will.

It is, he believes, the power of Will's own desires with which the blade has been imbued.

Hannibal eats standing, watching the way that Will watches him. His face is calm, and Hannibal does not believe himself to be in any real danger, but there is something hard and uncompromising in the way that he holds himself. Will does not open his mouth to be fed, and Hannibal understands that they are beyond such coltish games now; the siren will not be degraded any longer.

"You have demands," Hannibal says, when he has finished the tartare. He is not concerned that Will has gone hungry - from the looks of the carcass, he has already eaten his full. "Expectations."

The siren inclines his head, slowly, then raises it again to study Hannibal again.

"I acquiesce," Hannibal tells him, reaching out to pick up the knife. He turns it over in his hand, fascinated by its glow. "Unequivocally."

Will raises an arm, beckoning Hannibal closer, and when he steps forward the siren curls his arms around Hannibal and draws him down into a long, passionate kiss. Hannibal is careful to hold the blade at such an angle that neither of them are at risk of being cut.

Eventually, it is Hannibal who has to break away, surfacing for air, his head swimming with the giddy prospect that he might really be forgiven.

He finds himself weeping, quite unexpectedly. It softens the siren, for the first time since his return, and Will gives him a gentle smile and draws him down close again so he can kiss away the salt tears.

When he is calm again, Will uncurls his arms from around Hannibal's neck and begins to work at the buttons of his shirt. Hannibal sees what is wanted of him, and holding the knife with the blade pointed away from his body he strips, neatly and quickly, until he stands naked before Will.

Will's fingers run down his chest and the flat of his belly to brush against the base of his cock, which is already hardening.

"Last chance for that, I suppose?" Hannibal says, understanding. "It's alright, Will, I don't need it."

But Will is insistent, and so Hannibal lifts him from the table and carries him to the bed, careful not to prick him with the knife. He lays it on the bedside table, and for a time it is forgotten.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> CW for what could probably be read as self-harm in this one. Click on the End Notes for advice on what bits to skip to avoid that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They spend an hour in the soaking wet bed, onto which during that time Hannibal sloshes at least a dozen buckets of sea water. He's thoroughly ruined the linens, as well as the bed itself and the carpet surrounding it, but that matters not at all. Hannibal has no expectations of sleeping here ever again, and the important thing has been protecting the scales of Will's tail from drying out while Hannibal worships his body in every way that he can find to do so.

The siren's back arches and an unmodulated but lovely sound comes from his throat as, straddling him, Hannibal attends to the junction between the side of his jaw and his shoulder blade, just below the fragile lines of gills, nipping and kissing along the line of flesh and tasting the sea salt on Will's skin as the end of Will's tail splashes in the water pooled on top of the duvet.

He goes lower, his mouth tracing the shape of Will's larynx, tarrying to suck at the prominent adam's apple before moving along the wings of his clavicle bones, one and then the other, then ducking down to worry at one of the small tan nipples, immediately pleased by the extravagancy of Will's reaction to his ministrations.

A few minutes later, utterly overstimulated and panting so loudly that it completely drowns out the rustling of his gills, Will squirms beneath Hannibal and taps at his chest, and Hannibal relents, rolling onto his side to lay with his head level to the siren's chest, and because he cannot help it his fingers reach out to slowly stroke Will's stomach.

The smooth expanse of the siren's naveless belly is a subtle reminder of Will's providence, less striking than the gills or scaled tail but to Hannibal at least as fascinating. He marvels over its implications even as his hand skirt around the scar that he left there, imagining what it might have been like to come into being inside one of a cluster of small, transparent eggs.

He would like to ask Will if he has any memories of the time before he hatched, but knows that the siren won't be able to answer in any kind of detail - at least not yet. It has not been lost on Hannibal that Will has, in the short time since his return, demonstrated a causal and almost unconscious fluency in some form of sign language different from the ASL that Hannibal attempted to teach him years ago, and where Will picked that up at is as much of a mystery as who made the neat line of pinprick stitch scars that line the healed gash on Will's belly.

“I’d like to know who saved you my foolishness,” Hannibal says, daring now to run the ball of his thumb over the scar. “I owe them my gratitude.”

Relieved delight spills across Will’s face, and using his arms to pull himself into a sitting position he makes a flurry of signs, though of course he knows perfectly well that Hannibal cannot understand him.

“It’s all right, Will,” he says. “I’ll learn.”

Will nods seriously and makes another sign that seems to signal his agreement.

They are still for a little while, just basking in each other’s company, but eventually Hannibal sighs and reaches to take the knife from the bedside table.

It glows like something alive in his hand. He can remember the feel of it slicing into Will’s defenseless flesh.

“How is it done?” he asks Will.

Will runs his fingers over his own neck, tilting his head to show Hannibal as he traces the gills lightly, then he reaches out and rakes his nails along the side of Hannibal’s neck, first the left and then the right, leaving faint scratches that mirror the position of his own gills. .

Hannibal nods and holds the blade out for Will, but the siren shakes his head and refuses to take it from him.

This is, it seems, something Hannibal will have to do for - *to* - himself.

Hannibal turns the blade over in his hands, thinking, but it doesn’t take very long for him to reach a decision. There was never any question, really, to it; there’s nothing left for him anywhere else, and nothing he wants or has ever wanted more than to be with Will.

The cutting is not the hardest part.

He carefully aims the trajectory of the blade away from his arteries, yet still the warm blood drips down his arms and his chest like water, turning the pooled water they sit in pink, and though it hurts Hannibal’s pain tolerance has always been high, and he is committed to the task before him.

Change frequently hurts, he reminds himself as he works, and his hands remain as steady and confident as they would be were he operating on a patient. *Meaningful change demands pain,* but it is only when he has carved the slanted gashes, three on each side of his neck, that the agony really takes him.

What happens next is beyond any pain that he has experienced himself, nor anything he has inflicted upon another, and the knife slips from his hand and drops with a wet thud on the soggy carpet, but Hannibal does not hear that small sound over the roar inside of his own head and the cries that come from his throat.

But Will is there, leaning over Hannibal and holding his hands as his body begins to change, bones rearranging themselves and flesh knitting into new shapes, and the pure agony is such that Hannibal cannot stand outside of himself and marvel at the wonder of what is happening. All he can do is hold onto Will and attempt to bear up under it as well as he can.

Then the hurting is gone, so quickly that the agonized roar coming from his throat survives that pain by a full two seconds before he fully realizes that it has stopped. In the place of his cries Hannibal hears the rustle of the new gills that line the sides of his throat.

He hadn't realized that his eyes were squeezed closed, but he opens them now, blinking back tears to take inventory of himself.

The long tail with its flowing fins is a study in crimson and burnt amber, the scales as bright as coals in a fireplace, and now that the pain no longer rules him Hannibal finds himself regretting that he hadn't been able to better observe how this change came about, but comforts himself with the knowledge that one day soon Will will be able to relate it all to him.

Now, Hannibal's mind feels different, too, in a way that is perhaps more profound than anything that has happened to his body. He has always been self-contained, mentally and emotionally - Will alone is the only one to ever truly broach his walls - but the walls are down now, and the connection with Will that once seemed so profound is now dim as a moonless night.

In its place, he can see so many of the things that are inside Will's head, as clearly as if they shared the same skull.

Concern for Hannibal - fear that this has somehow gone wrong shifting delighted vindication at the sight of his new form - sits at the forefront of Will's mind. But when Hannibal reaches a little deeper he uncovers impressions of the stunning creatures that befriended Will in his extremity - the ones that saved Will from Hannibal's own terrified vicious spite, and Will's twin fears that they will no longer accept him, should he return to them with Hannibal at his side, and that Hannibal will do something to rob him of them.

"Lets go and see," Hannibal tells him, and is unsure if he is speaking English or Lithuanian or any other human tongue, though Will understands the words as clearly as Hannibal does. "If they won't have you back it won't be because I sought to take them from you."

Will's relief floods Hannibal, and it makes him want to move fast and free - to let all that pleasure out through the action of his own body.

But he is as awkward as a newborn foal, struggling to understand the dynamics of his new form, especially when so completely outside of that form's natural element, but Will is there for him, and he helps Hannibal to make it to the ship's bow.

They drop down into the water, hand in hand, and though the fall seems longer than it ought to be when they at last hit the water it all becomes perfectly natural.

Chapter End Notes

(CW Notes: To avoid depictions of cutting/self-harm stop at the point where Hannibal picks up the knife and then use the search function to pick up again at "But Will is there, leaning over Hannibal").

But wow... I actually finished this. It's been so long since I finished a project I'd almost forgotten how it feels.

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